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THE EFFECTS OF AN INNOVATION
INVOLVING CHOICE

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ABSTRACT

A principal's observations are used to illuminate the effects of innovation on a school 'community'.

Parents were given the opportunity to choose which of two optional programmes they wished to place their children in for one year. Over half the pupils (165) were placed in an alternative programme which broadly aimed to combine the advantages of the small rural with those of the larger urban school. Each teacher was responsible for a range of age groups and required to confer with individual pupils for at least fifteen minutes per week while senior pupils tutored others in the class.

Planned provision for catering for different cognitive styles, interests and attitudes succumbed to the stresses associated with major changes, class size, inadequacies in training, and professional, bureaucratic and social constraints.

The ramifications flowing from the exercise of choice greatly influenced all that transpired and became particularly significant as the roles, relationships, and functions of people were placed under increasing pressure.

Whether to introduce new ideas gradually or quickly is a problem facing the innovator. It was found though that many factors aside from rapid change had unpredictable bearings on intended outcomes.

The attempt to cater for the individual while seeking to capitalise on contextual social factors indicated that principals and teachers in novel situations need initial support and on-going training.

It is suggested that a single organisation cannot fully serve competing interests or different sets of values and that the association of the word 'community' with a mandatory organisation like a state school erodes the capacity of many to understand that consensus largely typifies a true community in terms of fundamental values.

Opportunity for considered choice in both value and other terms is advocated.

It is asserted that, since major innovations have profound effects on personal equilibriums, interpersonal and intergroup relationships, and upon the ethos in which a geographically identifiable group of people function, an innovator should be able to rely on stability and suitability of personnel so that planned gradual change towards consensual goals is possible.

The value of a monolithic state system of education offering relatively little choice is questioned. To mount viable alternatives permitting real choice is shown to be a rather daunting challenge.

PREFACE

Any participant reporter is indebted to his teaching colleagues and my thanks go not only to those in the programme which this report covers but also to all those teachers I have worked with over the years.

Tribute must also be paid to Professor Hill and the lecturers at Massey University who, through both extra-mural and internal courses, help students to appreciate the complexities and nuances of educational theory and practice.

My thanks go to Doctor Roy Nash for his advice and especially to my wife Judith for her consistent support and encouragement over the years.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	(i)
PREFACE	(iii)
INTRODUCTION	1
Chapter 1. Innovation: the milieu	4
Chapter 2. Interview	8
Chapter 3. Planning a televised investigation	13
Chapter 4. Preface for a play?	19
Chapter 5. A play - a snippet	23
Chapter 6. Discussion	29
The main issues	29
Some grounds for holding to value positions	32
Barriers to the development of goodwill.. .. .	32
Factors influencing the resolution of difficulties	34
Weaknesses and strengths	35
Specific effects of choice	36
Specific effects of changed methods	37
Theoretical considerations	38
Chapter 7. Conclusion	46
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY.. .. .	51
APPENDIX I.	54
APPENDIX II	73

INTRODUCTION

This report is intended to help practitioners in the field of education, particularly principals engaged in, or contemplating alternative approaches to schooling, and those directing courses which deal with innovation. It does not give a detailed description of the implementation of an innovative programme nor does it essay to make judgements about the success of the venture by comparison with others, or even about its effectiveness in attaining predetermined goals. It is hoped that the reader will gain insight into the processes and ramifications involved as the community, including parents, pupils, teachers and others, adjusted to change.

Statistical data is deliberately minimised and more than a little liberty is taken with the sequence of events. Each vignette portrays what actually happened but is adapted to include material from other episodes in the interests of brevity and readability. Authenticity is subject to the blemishes associated with participation. If purist-evaluators find this less than desirable then no apologies are offered for assaulting their composure even further by stating that much of the report is expressed in the form of a day-dream, with all the opportunities taken for editing and adaptation that this permits. The reader should still be somewhat entertained, know how and why the novel approach to schooling came into existence, appreciate what was intended by the programme, understand what actually happened, be aware of the less obvious pitfalls that await the innovator, and be in a position to sympathetically consider the judgements eventually made. Distortions are seen as being no more or less significant than those occasioned by overly statistical methods or those concerned with only one or two 'significant' variables. This after all is a report and what are seen as significant are essentially the concerns of the instigator, Max Sewell. It is intended that the mode of presentation adopted will ensure anonymity and obviate any grounds for participants feeling that they have been exposed to public scrutiny, as might be

the case if a documentary or more matter-of-fact style were used. Names and places have all been changed.

Smith and Keith (1971) in their preface state,

....we are struck by the calm voice of Professor Maslow (1964) who has urged educational innovators to be "good reporters" and to tell the story of their attempts at change.... At the universities and research and development centres, the scholarly world of professional education and social science, of which we are a part, has failed to do justice to the complicated problems involved in originating an innovative educational organisation. Investigators and theorists have not focussed hard enough, long enough, nor carefully enough on the small and mundane as well as the large and important issues and problems necessary for idealistic practitioners to carry out their dreams. ¹

Hamilton and Parlett (1977) see illumination as a valuable form of evaluation and, as a genre, not inferior to evaluation based on statistical analysis. They state,

The task is to provide a comprehensive understanding of the complex reality (or realities) surrounding the programme: in short to illuminate. In his report therefore, the evaluator aims to sharpen discussion, disentangle complexities, isolate the significant from the trivial and to raise the level of sophistication of debate. ²

Chapter one backgrounds the source of the innovation.

Chapter two highlights the stance of the innovator/leader.

Chapter three gives a picture of what was actually happening in the classrooms as a result of the innovation.

Chapter four directs attention to community factors.

¹L.M. Smith and P.M. Keith, Anatomy of innovation: an organisational analysis of an elementary school (New York: Wiley and Sons, 1971).

²D. Hamilton, M. Parlett, et al, eds., Beyond the Numbers Game (London: Macmillan Education Ltd., 1977), p.21.

Chapter five focusses on some of the effects on the teachers.

The reader is invited to select according to interest or to read all five chapters. Each view is magnified by the others and all serve as mirrors directing light on the discussion and conclusions which follow.

1

INNOVATION: THE MILIEU

(OR : TOO MUCH BATHING'LL WEAKEN YUH)

To the less perspicacious observer Max Sewell was just like any other forty three year old who enjoys a bath nearly every night as a way of relaxing. This night was special though. For the first time in nearly thirteen years he was completely free to read whatever he chose without feeling that he should be reading in a topic area for a paper or an exam. Over the years, despite a young family, he had worked towards a diploma in teaching, then a degree in education, and eventually completed honours work. From vague early notions of bettering himself he had become convinced that deliberate learning should be part of everyone's life and that if he was to become a competent educator then he must continue to learn. His attitude had changed from concern for passing papers to delight in wrestling with and studying specific problems in depth. Concurrently an initial sympathy with progressive ideas had led to small experiments or trials and finally to quite significant innovations involving more time and people. His professional life had fed upon self-imposed tension associated with constantly changing localities, schools, class levels, and responsibilities over twenty two years. The longest period in any school let alone class level had been four years. He had changed towns ten times excluding a period of four years relieving work in Australia and New Zealand. He had enjoyed teaching five and six year olds, and tended to assert that all teachers should have experience at that level, and found that teaching secondary pupils, while no more demanding, brought its own satisfactions. The conviction had grown that schooling of an inflexible type was not only not serving the best interests of the pupils or society but also perpetuating attitudes and accomplishment criteria that were inimicable to worthwhile life-long learning. Just how important is individual freedom in relation to the necessity for a group, community or society to control its members?

ERRATA

Page 5, line 19

After "manipulative ability" read "of scientific-man, human beings, children, babies thought in different" - ways,.....

Page 6, line 24

After "was essential, as" read "well as" - cooperative.....

The professional, educational practical, sociological, and even religious questions emanating from the dichotomy between individual autonomy and collective interests and responsibility had fascinated him over a long period. For Max the primacy of the individual was paramount. Humaneness involved interaction with real people whereas the reality of individual needs and aspirations tended to be hidden when human beings were thought of as abstractions from statistical data or purely scientific methods of study. Many school schemes, syllabuses, and teachers glibly paid lip-service only, to the academic, psychological, emotional, and social needs of the individual. Faced with the desire to improve things and armed with the experience gained as a teacher at all levels, a senior teacher, and finally principal, he had gradually come to the conclusion that the crucial factor governing the creation of situations where the individual was given real recognition was the availability of genuine choice. The curriculum should offer training, guidance, and experience in decision-making, not only in a pre-selected within-four-walls environment but also as a function of community life. The individual was important and deserved recognition simply because, despite the manipulative ability ways, perceived things differently, reacted physically and intellectually to different stimuli, developed physically, emotionally and mentally at different rates and in response to a variety of environments.

The Pukerimu Other Way (POW) was written up as a twelve page document in the latter half of 1976 and put into practice in 1977. Experience had taught Max that, even when great pains are taken to plan with a staff for a new approach, the end result was still a variegated approach dependent upon the personality, ability, preconceptions, expectations and motivation of each teacher. Beyond ascertaining that some staff members were amenable to changes of direction and had reasonable ability no attempt was made to involve them at that stage. He had reasoned that if innovations were to be tolerated by teachers and the general public then they had to be practical within everyday terms of the staffing of schools, the finance available, and the amount of time available. Therefore a 'package deal' was warranted. The inspectorate gave permission and the school committee was advised that another way of organising classes would be offered to parents in the new year depending on the results of meetings with the parents and their eventual choices. Parents were invited to come to the school on the

afternoon or evening of their choice to hear about and discuss the possible 'other way'. Two hundred and ninety children attended the school so seven meetings averaging around twenty three parents were held and about 90% of families were represented. Only those who attended meetings were eligible to make a choice of the Standard programme or POW for their children.

As a particularly bothersome moth flitted about the light disturbing other resting moths Max recalled that one meeting had been less than rewarding because a certain lady, a high school teacher and wife of a local country school teacher seemed determined to deride everything proposed and to persuade everyone else that they should not opt for POW. The other meetings varied in the way people became involved in discussion but generally the format, questions, and reactions were tolerant and rewarding. Certain points were emphasised (Appendix 1.) but care was taken not to denigrate the current programme or to suggest that POW would solve all difficulties or even be a guaranteed success. Basically another set of values would be emphasised and Max had 'stuck his neck out' only to the extent that he maintained that no child would be any worse off in POW academically. If individuals were important then they needed to make frequent personal contact with the teacher. They needed to see each other as different but nonetheless worthy acquaintances, helpers and people responsive to guidance from any able and sympathetic person - not just the teacher. If the pupils were to function as a group then communication was essential, as co-operative planning, and the recognition that pupils, as individuals, carried responsibilities for which they were accountable to the teacher. He had drawn parents' attention to studies which showed that some pupils passed through the school system without making any significant contact with a teacher at all - some went for days or even weeks without saying anything to the teacher. He had told them that he was small rural schools as having much that was educationally beneficial and difficult to find in larger schools. The combined benefits of the small rural school and the large town one would be sought through POW. Two weeks were allowed for reflection and discussion then the option forms were sent out. Though Max had mentioned to the parents that a similar venture (Smith & Keith, 1971) had failed 165 children were placed in POW.

Max hazily noted that a moth had met its end in the bath water and he mused.... The bathroom could represent education in general.... the water could be treatment for certain elements.... some elements were not attracted to the water - not even suited to it..... If the bathroom stood for education then how could POW be related?..... Perhaps it was like substituting a shower for a bath.... - choice as to temperature, whether to get totally immersed, whether to be selective, more economical use of resources..... Yes! There was a parallel perhaps... and his mind slipped into review gear again.

He had been delighted with the response. Unfortunately the class sizes were bigger than expected since he had hoped for about two or three classes averaging around 28 and had ended up with five averaging 33. Restriction of numbers entering POW would have posed other problems so he had decided to 'sound out' another two teachers. Two rooms had eighth, sixth, fourth, and late second year children. Three rooms had seventh, fifth, third, and middle second year children. He had not considered using only the experienced or permanent staff for POW as parents of children in the standard programme would have every right to complain. Anyway, if POW was to operate in everyday terms then some relatively inexperienced teachers would have to come to the programme 'cold' as it were. Max had a vague suspicion, later to be verified, that not all had entered the programme out of any real sympathy with the general aims and he knew that he was taking a risk in involving a year-two and a year-three teacher. He had handed to each of the teachers a copy of the POW programme knowing full well that very little of it would be read at that stage what with the holidays fast approaching and so much else to think about. However, before the new school year had begun all had met to discuss the basic ideas and routine organizational procedures.

Max mused. He imagined himself 'put on the spot' by some needling interviewer from the media.....